

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 006498

SIPDIS

NEA/IPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/19/2014

TAGS: [KWBG](#) [ECON](#) [IS](#) [SETTLEMENTS](#) [ISRAELI](#) [PALESTINIAN](#) [AFFAIRS](#)

SUBJECT: GUSH KATIF FARMERS SHORT-HANDED FOR HIGH SEASON AS
THAI WORKERS DEPART

Classified By: Economic Counselor Bill Weinstein for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: On Saturday, December 18, the visiting Thai Labor Minister and the Thai Ambassador to Israel met with 150 Thai agricultural workers in Gush Katif and encouraged them to leave the settlement for security reasons. The meeting resulted in over 80 workers tentatively agreeing to depart, either to find jobs inside Green Line Israel or return to Thailand. Gush Katif communications director Devorah Rosen told Econoff that only twenty Thais intend to leave, a number that would not cause the settlement farms to close permanently, but would hinder "high season" production from December to February, especially on farms larger than 20 dunams. In the longer-term Gush Katif hopes to replace departing Thais with Nepalese workers, but this lengthy bureaucratic process has been made more difficult by the GOI's reluctance to grant employment permits for settlements slated for evacuation. While Rosen asserted that Thai laborers are well-treated and better paid than their counterparts inside Israel, the Thai Embassy described poor working conditions in the settlement, including employers who withhold salaries and passports to prevent workers from fleeing. End Summary.

Thai Government Intensifies Push for Laborers to Leave

2. (SBU) Thai Labor Minister Uraiwan Thienthong and Thai Ambassador to Israel Kasivat Paruggamanont met December 18 with some 150 Thai laborers currently working in the Gush Katif settlement, in an effort to encourage them to depart immediately. The meeting was an intensification of the GoT's four-year-old policy of discouraging laborers from accepting employment in Gush Katif, and came on the heels of the third killing of a Thai worker in the Gaza Strip since the intifada began. According to Thai Deputy Chief of Mission Chantipha Phutrakul, some eighty laborers raised their hands when the Labor Minister asked, "Who is ready to leave?" Phutrakul noted that although the Minister cited Israel's planned withdrawal from Gaza as one of many incentives for laborers to depart, the GoT's concern is for laborers' security, "not Israel's political process."

Israeli Immigration Will Deport Illegals, Find Others Jobs

3. (C) Nearly one third of Gush Katif's Thai workers are illegally residing in Israel, and many are "using the settlement as a hide-out from the immigration police." Phutrakul said the Minister and the Ambassador addressed these laborers' fear of deportation by simply asking them to come home, stating, "You will find greener pastures elsewhere." Conversely, workers still in legal status can expect assistance from Israeli immigration -- Ambassador Paruggamanont met with the chief of the immigration police, who reportedly agreed to assist those workers whose visas are less than two years old in finding jobs inside Green Line Israel.

Every Worker Counts in High Season

4. (SBU) Devorah Rosen, Communications Director for Gush Katif, told Econoff that not more than 20 laborers will leave the settlement. "Eighty may have raised their hands at the meeting, but they didn't sign any agreement," she said. The settlement leadership is optimistic that Thai anxieties will dissipate within "three to four weeks", and that the Thai government's calls for depart will have little lasting effect on settlement agriculture. In the short term, however, even 20 lost laborers will prove problematic, since "every person counts" during the "high season" of production which runs from December to late February. She explained that the larger farmers -- those with more than 20 dunams of land -- will be hit especially hard by the loss of even a few laborers since unlike on smaller farms, landowners will be unable to fill in for the departed workers themselves.

GOI Hindering Long-Term Replacements

15. (SBU) While the manpower agency that supplies Gush Katif has brought in several Nepalese laborers who can replace Thais, settlement farmers are faced with a lengthy bureaucratic process within the Ministry of the Interior in order to secure permits for new workers. Since Gush Katif is slated for evacuation, the Ministry is reluctant to issue new work permits for the settlement. Rosen noted that farmers must ask the Ministry to transfer existing permits by canceling those of the Thai workers and reissuing them under the names of their Nepalese replacements. One can "read between the lines", she added, to see that the GOI is "making this about" disengagement. With only twenty workers who need replacing, Rosen said, the thorny permit process will be manageable. If that number increases, however, farming in Gush Katif could suffer a serious and long-term setback.

Katif Says Workers Satisfied, Thai Embassy Cites Maltreatment

16. (SBU) Rosen said that the Thai workers in Gush Katif are happy to stay -- they enjoy excellent treatment and high salaries, and they get Saturdays off, unlike their counterparts in Green Line Israel. As an example of good employer-employee relations she cited the winter coats the workers received as holiday gifts from their employers in Ganne Tal and Gush Katif. When it comes to the three Thais who were killed, she continued, laborers view themselves as "victims of circumstance" rather than specific targets of terrorism.

17. (C) In the view of the Thai Embassy, however, a vast majority of the Thai laborers in Gush Katif would prefer to work elsewhere. Relations with employers are bad, explained Phutrakul, with some farmers withholding salaries and passports in an attempt to prevent laborers from fleeing in the face of the ongoing security threat. She added that laborers are also forced to work 15-20 more hours per week than their Green Line Israel counterparts. Along with the constant security threat within the Gaza Strip, Thai laborers have found themselves in a situation Phutrakul said the GoT "cannot abide anymore."

Visit Embassy Tel Aviv's Classified Website:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/telaviv>

You can also access this site through the State Department's
Classified SIPRNET website.

KURTZER